

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 11 | Issue 4

Article 3

10-1-1994

John Locke's Epistemological Piety: Reason is the Candle of the Lord

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Wolterstorff, Nicholas (1994) "John Locke's Epistemological Piety: Reason is the Candle of the Lord," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 4 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol11/iss4/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

JOHN LOCKE'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL PIETY: REASON IS THE CANDLE OF THE LORD

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Not only is John Locke's *thought* shaped by Christian conviction; interspersed in his writings on politics and epistemology are suggestions as to how his conclusions on these matters are to be incorporated into lives of Christian piety. In this paper I focus on Locke's views as to how his epistemology, with its peculiar blend of skepticism and confidence, is to be incorporated into a life of gratitude and obedience. The theme of Reason, as an indistinguishable source of light given from God, is prominent in the discussion.

John Locke's philosophy is an episode in the history of Christian thought—by which I do not mean that it contains Christian thoughts here and there, but that the fundamental framework of Locke's philosophical reflections is Christianity. "A Christian I am sure I am," Locke wrote on one occasion (*Works* VII,359). We don't need Locke's testimony for that; nor do we need biographical background. It's evident from his writing. Locke's Christianity was not an allegiance *in addition to* his philosophy but the *fundamental framework* thereof. Naturally some parts of his philosophical thought are more intimately intertwined with that framework than others, so that, for purposes of discussion or appropriation, one and another part can be abstracted and the Christian character of the framework momentarily neglected. Nonetheless, the point remains: It is Christianity that provides the fundamental pattern and dynamic of Locke's philosophy; we constantly run the danger of misunderstanding what he is saying and why he is saying it unless we take account of that.¹

That claim deserves detailed defense. On this occasion, however, I will instead develop the argument that Locke's philosophical writing, beyond being an episode in the history of Christian thought, is an episode in the history of Christian *piety*. Locke tells us how the picture at which he has arrived, of our place as human beings in the scheme of things, should be appropriated into a life of Christian piety. He articulates a *political piety*, appropriate to our political condition; and, more strikingly, an *epistemological piety*, appropriate to our epistemological condition. It is the contours of that latter piety that I will be describing. A full discussion would of course have to show how these two sides of Locke's piety fit together into one whole.

Locke gave birth to a new type of Christian piety—more accurately, *helped* to give birth to a new type. The type does not, to the best of my knowledge,



have a name; but just as we call a certain type of Christian piety, "Lutheran piety," so I propose to call this type, "Lockean piety." Lockean piety became extraordinarily pervasive in the modern Western world, and has proved unusually enduring. It's my impression that today it is to be found mainly, though certainly not exclusively, among those 'evangelicals' whose religious roots lie in England—among Anglo-evangelicals. Let me characterize the type with some quick broad strokes.

Fundamental to Lockean piety is a deep sense of gratitude to God for Reason, and an equally deep sense of obligation to God to use one's Reason, and to use it properly. This commitment to obedience takes the form of being deeply concerned with the attainment of *certainly*, and with believing what is *probable* on the basis of what is certain. Modern natural science is seen as a paradigmatic example of using Reason properly. Rather often, in fact, the Lockean pietist is a natural scientist by profession; but whether or not she is that, she will be deeply committed to using Reason in religion and morality in the same way in which it is used in good natural science. The Lockean pietist is typically suspicious of the humanities, perhaps not for what they are in essence, but certainly for what they are in fact. In them one sees very little of the proper use of Reason, as witnessed by their heavy dependence on tradition. In Lockean piety, tradition is up against the firing wall— theological tradition, ecclesiastical tradition, intellectual tradition, makes no difference. Unless, of course, the tradition in question is a tradition like that of modern natural science, in which Reason has been properly used.

The outsider to Lockean piety who thinks of *faith* as trust has the impression that, in Lockean piety, Reason has replaced God-in-Christ as the object of Christian faith. The Lockean pietist dismisses this as imperceptive. But all too often the battle never really joins. For the Lockean thinks of faith differently. Faith is the acceptance of propositions on the ground of their being (or having been) revealed by God. Faith, thus understood, if properly held, is based on Reason. The revelation whose content faith accepts is not reduced to the deliverances of Reason; not at all. But God asks of us that we test the many competing claims to revelation that come our way—that we "test the spirits." It would be deeply irresponsible on our part not to do so.

A condition of holding the Christian faith responsibly is that one first establish that the Christian scriptures are a reliable record of ancient revelation; then, but only then, is one entitled to accept the content of the revelation. Locke himself was of the conviction that the Bible is in fact an *inerrant* record of revelation; that conviction has remained characteristic of Lockean piety. But in any case, the Bible is central in Lockean piety. Not one and another tradition of biblical interpretation; those are all human. Just the Bible. Of course Jesus Christ is also important; he was the principal revealer. But our only access to him is through the Bible; so in Lockean piety, given its epis-

temological preoccupations, the Bible is more prominent than Jesus Christ. It's no accident that Karl Barth has evoked such hostility among evangelicals; as does 'post-modernism,' with its celebration of tradition, its scepticism concerning the possibility of getting to 'the things themselves,' its unconcern with certainty, its charge that Reason is tyrannical.

Not only does the Lockean pietist seek and assemble and rehearse evidence that the Bible is an inerrant record of God's revelation; she seeks and assembles and rehearses evidence for the prior claim that God exists. God, in Lockean piety, is never someone of whom one is aware—someone present to one. God is an inferred entity. That's not to deny that God works both in us and in history. But we *infer* that God does so, from the traces; God is no more present to us for our awareness than are sticks and stones and bones—and other persons.

A natural consequence of all this is that the Lockean pietist regards the work of the academy with a peculiar blend of hope and dread. While the results of that work bear the promise of containing new evidence for God's existence and for the Bible as the inerrant record of divine revelation, they also bear the menace of undercutting or defeating what one had taken to be good evidence for those. The pursuit of certainty causes anxiety.

This is that general type of Christian piety of which, as I read the history, John Locke was the great founder. Let me now describe the precise form it took in Locke himself, concluding with just a few critical observations.²

Over and over in his *Essay*, when Locke wants to draw our attention to the main features of the picture which he there draws of our place as knowers and believers in the world, he uses three terms as a metaphor cluster: "day-light," "darkness," and "twilight." It's important to know in advance that the sort of 'half-light' he has in mind when he speaks of twilight is not only the half-light produced by the sun just below the horizon, but also the 'half-light' produced by the glow of a candle.

If you tell me, on a certain occasion, that you feel dizzy, and I believe you, then I have acquired a cognitive grip on your dizziness sufficient for me to make judgments about it, believe things about it, form intentions concerning it, and so forth. I may, for example, form the judgment about it—not about something else, but about *it*—that it was caused by your having ridden that merry-go-round too long. Or without your saying anything, I might interpret your staggering around after riding the merry-go-round as a manifestation of your dizziness; that would also give me a cognitive grip on your dizziness sufficient for me to form judgments, beliefs, and intentions about it. Either way, though, I'm not *aware* of your dizziness, as I would be of my own dizziness if I felt dizzy.

There are a great many philosophers and literary theorists writing presently who, if their words are to be taken at face value, deny that we human beings

are ever aware of anything. All is interpretation, nothing is given. Apparently interpretations themselves are not given. Nothing is ever presented to us for our awareness. There is no presence.

John Locke was of course unacquainted with twentieth-century hermeneutical writing; without argument or hesitation he assumed that we human beings are *aware* of certain entities. The word Locke himself favored was "perceive," used metaphorically. We 'perceive' certain entities, including certain facts. Or to use, in turn, his parlance for what I call facts: We 'perceive' certain *agreements* and *disagreements* among entities. For Locke, the only live question was the scope of awareness.

His answer, famously, was that it is only of one's own ideas, and their agreements and disagreements, that one can be aware. I shall on this occasion strenuously resist the temptation to try to say what exactly Locke meant by "ideas"—if, indeed, there is *anything exact* that he meant by it. I think, however, that the meaning of the verb "conscious of" in contemporary English is such that we can express Locke's view this way: One is truly aware only of those entities that one is conscious of, and whose logical relationships one grasps. I am conscious of my dizziness, when I am dizzy; Locke would say that my dizziness is something that I 'perceive.' When I judge about something that it is a prime number, I am both conscious of doing so and conscious of my thought about it; Locke would say that the act of judging and the predicative thought are items that I 'perceive.'

Locke's official account of knowledge was that knowledge is awareness, 'perception.' I call it his "official account" because, in the fine mesh of his discussion, he knowingly backs away from the identification of knowledge with awareness. That is perhaps most decisively clear in his discussion of memory. He observes that we remember many things that we don't actively have in mind—things that we aren't presently conscious of; and he concedes that some of such rememberings are knowings. In Locke's unsteady attempts to sort out the relation between knowledge and awareness, one sees conflicting impulses at work. But what he never wavers on is his conviction that it is only objects of consciousness that one is aware of; only those are present to one for one's 'perception.'

And now for the first use of the metaphor cluster: "Light, true light in the mind is, or can be nothing else but the evidence of the truth of any proposition..." (*Essay* IV,xix,13). The light of evidence has its source in those facts of which the mind is aware—which are evident to the mind. These cast light on those other facts for which they are evidence; they illuminate those others. But they are themselves the only true light-sources. They are to the mind as the light of the sun is to the physical eye. Such a fact "is irresistible, and like the bright Sun-shine, forces it self immediately to be perceived, as soon as ever the mind turns its view that way; and leaves no room for hesitation,

doubt, or examination, but the mind is presently filled with the clear light of it" (*Essay* IV,ii,1).

All else is dark. And when we take due note of the fact that those items and facts susceptible of human awareness are "very short and scanty" (IV,xiv,1) compared to the totality of things, we realize that these light sources are tiny dots in what, apart from the illumination they cast on a few other facts, is an "abyss of darkness" (IV,iii,22). Our "knowledge [is] limited to our ideas, and cannot exceed them either in extent, or perfection...." These are "very narrow bounds, in respect of the extent of all being, and far short of what we may justly imagine to be in some even created understandings, not tied down to the dull and narrow information, is to be received from some few, and not very acute ways of perception, such as are our senses...." It would nonetheless "be well with us, if our knowledge were but as large as our ideas, and there were not many doubts and enquiries concerning the ideas we have;" but even that proves not to be the case (IV,iii,6).

Locke devotes page after page to this theme of "how disproportionate our knowledge is to the whole extent even of material beings," not to mention of spirits, "which are yet more remote from our knowledge, whereof we have no cognizance," so that "almost the whole intellectual world" is concealed from us "in an impenetrable obscurity" (IV,iii,27). Yet a good many commentators give that theme at best a minor place in their presentation of Locke's thought. The problem—part of it, at least—is Locke's rhetoric. We would expect, from someone so profoundly impressed with the scope of our ignorance, intense and anguished rhetoric. There's intensity in some of Locke's rhetoric, but no anguish; all is serene. That itself—as will shortly become clear—is a manifestation of Locke's piety; Locke's rhetoric is the rhetoric of contentment. Such piety is unfamiliar to us. Nonetheless the theme, to those who have ears to hear, is ringingly clear:

Our knowledge being so narrow, as I have shew'd it, it will, perhaps, give us some light into the present state of our minds, if we look a little into the dark side, and take a view of our ignorance: which being infinitely larger than our knowledge, may serve much to the quieting of disputes, and improvement of useful knowledge; if discovering how far we have clear and distinct ideas, we confine our thoughts within the contemplation of those things, that are within the reach of our understandings, and launch not out into that abyss of darkness (where we have not eyes to see, nor faculties to perceive anything,) out of a presumption, that nothing is beyond our comprehension (IV,iii,22).

Items of intuitive knowledge, when present to the mind, force themselves to be 'perceived' "as soon as ever the mind turns its view that way," said Locke. Thus the will has an important, though ultimately secondary, role to play in what we come to know. The analogy to vision is again instructive. Though "a man with his eyes open in the light, cannot but see; yet there be

certain objects, which he may choose whether he will turn his eyes to." And then further: "though he turns his eyes sometimes towards an object, yet he may choose whether he will curiously survey it, and with an intent application, endeavour to observe accurately all that is visible in it" (IV,xiii,1-2). So too, "the employing, or withholding any of our faculties from this or that sort of objects," is a matter of volition on our part, as is our "more, or less accurate survey of them" (IV,xiii,2). Apart from that, however, "our will hath no power to determine the knowledge of the mind one way or other; that is done only by the objects themselves, as far as they are clearly discovered" (*ibid.*).

Though that is the whole of the will's role in the formation of *intuitive* knowledge, it is by no means the whole of the will's role in the formation of knowledge in general. We have it in our power to construct arguments in which, as Locke sees the matter, we come to 'perceive' agreements and disagreements among ideas which we would have missed but for the fact that, in the argument, we interpose between those 'extremes' a greater or lesser number of 'middle terms' whose inter-relations we 'perceive' as we move along the argument. If this is to yield knowledge it must also be the case, of course, that when we arrive at the final term, we remember the path we have taken. By and large we have to *construct* such arguments; we don't just passively receive them. And in that construction, the will plays a significant role.

we have, here and there, a little of this clear light, some sparks of bright knowledge: yet the greatest part of our ideas are such, that we cannot discern their agreement, or disagreement, by an immediate comparing them. And in all these, we have need of reasoning, and must, by discourse and inference, make our discoveries (IV,xvii,15).

There is thus considerable scope for what Locke calls "the improvement of our knowledge." Though nature is hardly at all susceptible to being known by us, the situation for religion and morality—along with mathematics—is quite different. In principle it's possible to go a long way in the construction of a demonstrative theology and a demonstrative morality. One might even say that "morality [that is, the acquisition of moral knowledge] is the proper science, and business of mankind in general (who are both concerned, and fitted to search out their *summum bonum*)..." (IV,xii,11). It's true that our knowledge will "never reach to all we might desire to know concerning [even] those ideas we have..." (IV,iii,6). Nevertheless, says Locke,

I do not question, but that human knowledge, under the present circumstances of our beings and constitutions may be carried much farther, than it hitherto has been, if men would sincerely, and with freedom of mind, employ all that industry and labour of thought, in improving the means of discovering truth, which they do for the colouring or support of falsehood, to maintain a system, interest, or party, they are once engaged in (IV,iii,6).

Demonstrative arguments are sources of light; they, along with the objects of intuitive knowledge, shed light into the mind. At bottom it's the same kind of light: viz., "the evidence of the truth of [a] proposition." But the light cast by demonstrative arguments is less intense, its brilliance diminished by the presence of all those 'middle terms' and by the need for memory.

Locke was presumably aware of the fact that many of his readers would be tempted to respond to his argument that "our understandings [come] exceeding short of the vast extent of things" (I,i,5) by railing against the absurdity of our fate—against its "whimsicalness," to use Hume's term. But in fact he never so much as explicitly acknowledges the temptation. Instead, after swiftly drawing a sketch of our state in the opening chapter of the *Essay*, he immediately moves on to urge, in the first place, *contentment*: "to stop, when [the understanding] is at the utmost extent of its tether; and to sit down in a quiet ignorance of those things, which, upon examination, are found to be beyond the reach of our capacities;" to "learn to content ourselves with what is attainable by us in this state" (I,i,4). And then, even more strikingly, *gratitude*. Rather than railing against the cosmos for all that our nature makes us incapable of knowing, let us take note of what we are capable of knowing, let us acknowledge that our capacities for such knowledge have been bestowed on us by God, and let us thank God accordingly. Though "the comprehension of our understandings, comes exceeding short of the vast extent of things; yet, we...have cause enough to magnify the bountiful author of our being, for that portion and degree of knowledge, he has bestowed on us, so far above all the rest of the inhabitants of this our mansion" (I,i,5).

And what, specifically, is it about our human capacities for knowledge that we should be thankful for? That God has given to human beings "whatsoever is necessary for the conveniences of life, and information of virtue; and has put within the reach of their discovery the comfortable provision for this life and the way that leads to a better. How short soever their knowledge may come of an universal, or perfect comprehension of whatsoever is, it yet secures their great concerns, that they have light enough to lead them to the knowledge of their maker, and the sight of their duties" (I,i,5).

Our powers of knowledge have been bestowed on us by God; to the discernment of the beneficial contours of what lies within those powers, the appropriate response is contented gratitude. But it is up to us to use those powers to expand our knowledge—specifically, to use them as God has obligated us to use them. To Locke's epistemological piety concerning knowledge there are thus two sides: Obedience along with Gratitude.

We shall not have much reason to complain of the narrowness of our minds, if we will but employ them about what may be of use to us; for of that they are very capable: And it will be an unpardonable, as well as childish peevishness, if we undervalue the advantages of our knowledge, and neglect to

improve it to the ends for which it was given us, because there are some things that are set out of the reach of it. It will be no excuse to an idle and untoward servant, who would not attend his business by candle-light, to plead that he had not broad sunshine. The candle, that is set up in us, shines bright enough for all our purposes (I,i,5).

We have heard Locke speaking of sunlight, in varying degrees of brightness, and of darkness; now, suddenly, candles and candlelight. What does he have in mind? The truth is that he has changed the subject—abruptly so. Let me begin laying out the new subject by quoting from the next sentence: “we shall then use our understandings right, when we entertain all objects in that way and proportion, that they are suited to our faculties; and upon those grounds, they are capable of being proposed to us; and not peremptorily, or intemperately require demonstration, and demand certainty, where probability only is to be had....” Just as we had not previously heard of candles and candlelight, so we have not previously heard of probability. They are all connected.

Locke spends the first thirteen chapters of Book IV of the *Essay* discussing one and another aspect of knowledge. I have already observed that he wavers a bit in what he takes knowledge to be; nonetheless, this at least can be said: Knowledge in its paradigmatic form is awareness, ‘perception’. At the beginning of chapter xiv he turns to a new topic, on which he then spends the remainder of the *Essay*. That new topic is *belief* and *judgment*. He introduces the topic like this:

The understanding faculties being given to man, not barely for speculation, but also for the conduct of his life, man would be at a great loss, if he had nothing to direct him, but what has the certainty of true knowledge. For that being very short and scanty, as we have seen, he would be often utterly in the dark, and in most of the actions of his life, perfectly at a stand, had he nothing to guide him in the absence of clear and certain knowledge (IV,xiv,1).

In fact we human beings have something more to direct and guide us than knowledge. That ‘something more’ is as much part of our creaturely endowment as is our capacity for knowledge; for it, too, gratitude to God is the appropriate response.

This ‘something more’ has two sides, one of those being, in place of bright light of “the certainty of true knowledge,” the twilight of probability:

as God has set some things in broad daylight; as he has given us some certain knowledge, though limited to a few things in comparison, probably, as a taste of what intellectual creatures are capable of, to excite in us a desire and endeavour after a better state: So in the greatest part of our concernment, he has afforded us only the twilight, as I may so say, of probability, suitable, I presume, to that state of mediocrity and probationership, he has been pleased to place us in here... (IV,xiv,2).³

The other side of the 'something more' is judgment and belief. "The faculty, which God has given man to supply the want of clear and certain knowledge in cases where that cannot be had, is judgment: whereby the mind takes its ideas to agree, or disagree; or which is the same, any proposition to be true or false, without perceiving a demonstrative evidence in the proofs" (IV,xiv,3).

Knowledge is the awareness of a fact—or in Lockean terminology, the 'perception' of some agreement or disagreement among entities. Thereby it is also the awareness of the truth of the corresponding proposition. Judgment and belief, by contrast, are the *taking of* entities to agree or disagree, the *taking of* propositions to be true. Obviously there is no hope whatsoever of understanding Locke if we read him through the lens of the contemporary epistemological consensus that knowledge is a species of belief. Indeed, the way in which Locke introduces the knowledge/judgment distinction, in the passage cited, would lead one to infer that he goes so far in the other direction as to hold that judgment and belief are only present when knowledge is absent. In fact, though, it was his view that awareness of some fact typically evokes the taking of the corresponding proposition to be true; knowledge, though not a species of belief, nonetheless typically evokes a correlative belief. (That this is Locke's view comes to the surface especially in his chapter on "Maxims," in IV,vii.)

We saw earlier that corresponding to God's gift to us of the capacity for knowledge are God's commands to us concerning the acquisition of knowledge; the appropriate piety included, as we saw, both contented gratitude and obedience. So too for judgment and belief: the appropriate piety includes obedience along with gratitude. The character of the divine injunction to which obedience is required is somewhat different in this case, however. What God asks of us *qua* cognitive beings is that we expand our knowledge in various directions. That's not what God asks of us *qua* doxastic beings. For whereas only facts can be 'perceived,' falsehoods are as readily believed as truths. What God asks of us is that we *regulate* our belief-forming faculties, not so that we believe *more* things, but so that we believe *fewer false* things. Assent of the mind, says Locke,

if it be regulated, as is our duty, cannot be afforded to anything, but upon good reason....He that believes, without having any reason for believing, may be in love with his own fancies; but neither seeks truth as he ought, nor pays the obedience due to his maker, who would have him use those discerning faculties he has given him, to keep him out of mistake and error. He that does not this to the best of his power, however he sometimes lights on truth, is in the right but by chance; and I know not whether the luckiness of the accident will excuse the irregularity of his proceeding. This at least is certain, that he must be accountable for whatever mistakes he runs into: whereas he that makes use of the light and faculties God has given him, and seeks

sincerely to discover truth, by those helps and abilities he has, may have this satisfaction in doing his duty as a rational creature, that though he should miss truth, he will not miss the reward of it. For he governs his assent right, and places it as he should, who in any case or matter whatsoever, believes or disbelieves, according as reason directs him. He that does otherwise, transgresses against his own light, and misuses those faculties, which were given him to no other end, but to search and follow the clear evidence, and greater probability (IV,xvii,24).

Light and faculties, clear evidence, greater probability: We must try to understand what Locke has in mind in speaking of those. First, though, a quick comment on the *scope* of doxastic obligation. The passage I have quoted is ringingly universalistic in tone: Everyone *in any case or matter whatsoever....* But in the course of Locke's discussion it becomes clear that he doesn't really mean this. The method he recommends takes time to apply; no one has time to apply it for all of her beliefs, and some have time to apply it for only a few. Locke's thought is this: Each of us is obligated, for certain issues, to try our best to get in touch with reality on that issue. Let us say that some proposition is of *maximal concernment*—"concernment" is Locke's word—to a person just in case that person is obligated to try his or her best to bring it about that he or she believes it if and only if it is true. The method which Locke outlines is the method which, in his judgment, we must use when some proposition is of maximal concernment to us. Many of the propositions we believe and entertain are not of maximal concernment to us; for such, we are under no obligation to use the method. Only in the light of a person's total obligations can one determine which propositions are of maximal concernment to her. And the results of the determination will differ from person to person—with just this proviso: Fundamental matters of morality and religion are of maximal concernment to everyone.

Now for the method. Suppose that proposition P is a matter of maximal concernment for me; I am under obligation to try my best to bring it about that I believe P if and only if P is true. What do I do? What method do I follow? I begin by gathering a satisfactory body of evidence concerning the truth or falsehood of P. That body of evidence must consist of things that I know—*know* in Locke's stringent sense of "know." Otherwise, I'm not doing my best. But obviously more is required than that. It must be a *satisfactory* collection of items of knowledge. Locke doesn't say a great deal about what that comes to. But clearly the body of evidence must be of sufficient amplitude, and must not be skewed. In its totality it must be a reliable indicator of whether P is true or false. Once I have gathered a satisfactory body of evidence, I then determine the probability of P on that evidence. And lastly, I endeavor to believe or disbelieve P with a firmness appropriate to its probability on that evidence.

And where is Reason in all this? Locke wavers in what he calls Reason.

Sometimes the set of mental activities that he calls "Reason" is wide in its scope, sometimes, narrow. Probably the widest is that indicated in this passage:

we may in Reason consider these four degrees; the first and highest, is the discovering, and finding out of proofs; the second, the regular and methodical disposition of them, and laying them in a clear and fit order, to make their connexion and force be plainly and easily perceived; the third is the perceiving their connection; and the fourth, the making a right conclusion (IV,xvii,3).

Locke's subsequent discussion leaves little doubt that he regards the third in this list as fundamental. He says as much himself, just before he gives the four-fold list. The "faculty which finds out the means, and rightly applies them to discover certainty in the one [case], and probability in the other, is that which we call Reason," he says. He continues: "For as Reason perceives the necessary, and indubitable connexion of all the ideas or proofs one to another, in each step of any demonstration that produces knowledge: so it likewise perceives the probable connexion of all the ideas or proofs one to another, in every step of a discourse, to which it will think assent due." And then he adds: "This is the lowest degree of that, which can be truly called Reason"—by "lowest degree" clearly meaning, *fundamental* degree.

It's easy now to see why Locke spoke of the *twilight of probability*—that is to say, of the half-light of probability. The only light-sources are those facts which the mind 'perceives.' When 'perceived' facts are assembled into some demonstrative proof, the light cast by all of them together on the agreement or disagreement of the terms in the conclusion is dimmed somewhat by the presence of the middle terms in the proof and by the need for memory. When 'perceived' facts are assembled into the evidence for some non-demonstrative inference, the light they cast on the conclusion is dimmed yet farther—so much so that, unless the probability is very high, we find ourselves in a sort of half-light.

One could wish that Locke had always used his metaphor-cluster as I have thus far reported. Though he warns, in a famous passage in Book III of the *Essay*, against metaphorical thinking in philosophy, he is in fact one of the great metaphor makers of the English philosophical tradition. If one didn't already know that, it would be clear just from the passages I have cited. But in the matter at hand, Locke's gift fails him; his use of the light metaphors falls into incoherence.

In all the passages I have cited thus far, the light comes from the things 'perceived.' Let's have before us, once more, the basic passage:

Light, true light in the mind is, or can be nothing else but the evidence of the truth of any proposition; and if it be not a self-evident proposition, all the light it has, or can have, is from the clearness and validity of those proofs, upon which it is received. To talk of any other light in the understanding is to put ourselves in the dark, or in the power of the Prince of Darkness (IV,xix,13).

But when Locke spoke, in another passage I cited, of "the candle that is set up in us" which "shines bright enough for all our purposes," it was *Reason* he had in mind. "The light of Reason" (I,iv,9, and *passim*) is "the candle of the Lord" (IV,iii,20, and *passim*).

So what is the situation: Is it the facts we 'perceive' which are the light-sources, and do they illuminate the things we properly infer from them; or is it our faculty of Reason which is the light-source, illuminating the things perceived and properly inferred? It's as clear as anything is in Locke that he would answer, "The former." But Locke was also the inheritor of a long tradition in which writers regularly spoke of "the light of Reason;" perhaps it was the tug of that tradition on him that led him to stray into incoherence. Though that can't be the whole of the matter, since it's obvious that the apothegm, "Reason is the candle of the Lord," was a favorite of his; no inadvertence here.

The incoherence of Locke's use of the metaphors doesn't ultimately matter. Doesn't matter *philosophically*, that is to say; aesthetically, it certainly does. We know what he wants to say: Reason is that faculty whereby we 'perceive' the light cast by the premisses of an argument on its conclusion—when the argument is a good one and the premisses are primary light-sources. The premisses are both sources of light and the casters of light; they are self-evident, but they are also evidence-for. When we 'perceive' that, then by metaphorical transference we can say that the faculty of Reason whereby we 'perceive' it is itself a light-source—though more like a candle than the sun. One remembers Aristotle's example of "healthy" transferred from the healthy person to the person's urine: "healthy urine"!

We come at last to what is perhaps most deeply felt in Locke's epistemological piety: Reason, the candle of the Lord, is inextinguishable. It cannot be blown out. Locke observes that it is typical of the "parties of men" to "cram their tenets down all men's throats, whom they can get into their power, without permitting them to examine their truth or falsehood...." And so it is that instead of greater light in the moral sciences, the "subject part of mankind, in most places, might...with Egyptian bondage, expect Egyptian darkness, were not the candle of the Lord set up by himself in men's minds, which it is impossible for the breath or power of man wholly to extinguish" (IV,iii,20).

The point is eminently Lockean, repeated over and over in the *Essay*. We fail to expand our knowledge and fail to regulate our beliefs as we ought. We fail to do our duties as cognitive and doxastic creatures. We violate the norms for knowledge and belief. Thereby we disobey the Lord our God; for it is in God's commanding some action of us, and in God's backing up that command with sanctions, that obligation is to be located. We are one and all epistemological sinners. Yet Reason remains.

What sometimes diminishes our guilt is that we have been “put upon” by others —tyrannized. Then the fault lies more with the tyrant than with us. Tyranny comes in many forms. One of the most pervasive and insidious is epistemological tyranny: Trying to get people to believe things without examining them for themselves. Cramming tenets down the throats of men and women without permitting them to examine their truth or falsehood. The “authority to be the dictator of principles, and teacher of unquestionable truths,” is no “small power [of] one man over another....” So no wonder that partisan leaders regularly “put their followers upon a necessity of receiving some doctrines as such; which [is] to take them off from the use of their own reason and judgment, and put them upon believing and taking them upon trust, without farther examination: In which posture of blind credulity, they might be more easily governed by, and made useful to some sort of men, who had the skill and office to principle and guide them” (I,iv,24). All too often the leader succeeds. All too often one finds followers who “are resolved to stick to [the] party, that education or interest has engaged them in; and there, like the common soldiers of an army, show their courage and warmth, as their leaders direct, without ever examining, or so much as knowing the cause they contend for” (IV,xx,18).

It is to this pervasiveness of epistemological tyranny that Locke mainly points when, in *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, he addresses himself at some length to the question why revelation was necessary. Locke affirms that God may well reveal things to us which are beyond our human capacities for finding out. But that is not what he emphasizes in *The Reasonableness*. Instead he argues that most of the content of Christianity is *reasonable*—that is to say, probable on satisfactory evidence available to us human beings. Yet it remains the case that most of it was not in fact discovered; and what little was discovered, was either confined to hermetic philosophical circles or publicized in a thoroughly unpersuasive manner. The lack of persuasiveness was due, in part, to rhetorical inadequacies in the presentation. And no doubt there was more than enough laziness to spread around. But advance in the knowledge of natural religion and natural law was above all stymied by the epistemological tyranny of those who held religious power in their hands: the ‘priests’.

Though the works of nature, in every part of them, sufficiently evidence a Deity, yet the world made so little use of their reason that they saw him not where, even by the impressions of himself, he was easy to be found. Sense and lust blinded their minds in some, and a careless inadvertency in others, and fearful apprehensions in most...gave them up into the hands of their priests, to fill their heads with false notions of the Deity, and their worship with foolish rites....In this state of darkness and ignorance of the true God, vice and superstition held the world. Nor could any help be had or hoped for from reason, which could not be heard, and was judged to have nothing to

do in the case, the priests everywhere, to secure their empire, having excluded reason from having anything to do in religion....The belief and worship of one God was the national religion of the Israelites alone; and if we will consider it, it was introduced and supported amongst the people by revelation. They were in Goshen and had light, while the rest of the world were in almost Egyptian darkness (*Reasonableness* §238).⁴

The Israelites "were in Goshen and had light." Once again, the light metaphor. But the light which the Israelites uniquely enjoyed was neither the evidence of propositions nor the capacity of discerning that evidence. It was the light of revelation. On a few occasions Locke speaks of Reason as a mode of revelation; as, for example, when he says that "When we find out an idea, by whose intervention we discover the connexion of two others, this is a revelation from God to us, by the voice of Reason. For we then come to know a truth we did not know before. When God declares any truth to us, this is a revelation to us by the voice of his Spirit, and we are advanced in our knowledge" (IV,vii,11). But he immediately goes on to distinguish Reason as revelation from revelation proper, in which "God himself affords [a truth] immediately to us, and we see the truth of what he says in his unerring veracity" (*ibid.*). It is this that Locke sometimes describes as *light*: "the light of revelation." In revelation, God "illuminates the mind with supernatural light" (IV,xix,14); God "enlighten[s] the understanding by a ray darted into the mind immediately from the fountain of light" (IV,xix,5). "God, in giving us the light of Reason has not thereby tied up his own hands from affording us, when he thinks fit, the light of revelation" (IV,xviii,8). The "clear revelation" which our Savior brought into the world, viz., the "light of the gospel," has "dissipated the darkness" and "dispelled" the "mists" (*Reasonableness* §239).

Must we then qualify the claim that the only "true light in the mind" is the evidence originating from propositions: Self-evidence, or the evidence which the self-evident facts provide for others? Locke thinks not. He reasons as follows: Revelation is at bottom testimony, *Divine* testimony; and testimony in general, if it be veridical, is a form of evidence, thereby, of light. Indeed, testimony is "all the light we have in many cases; and we receive from it a great part of the useful truths we have, with a convincing evidence" (IV,xvi,11).

It is, though, a somewhat peculiar form of evidence, on Locke's construal of how it works as evidence. If S testifies that P is true, then, if I have evidence that the relevant type of speech-act to which S's testimony belongs is an overall reliable type, S's testimony functions for me as evidence concerning the truth of P; otherwise, it doesn't. The fact that S testified to P does not by itself cast evidence on anything whatsoever. Let's apply the point. If someone says that God revealed P to her, then there are two relevant types

of speech-acts to be concerned with: One is the type, *God testifying to something*, and the other is the relevant sub-type of that large and amorphous type, *human being testifying that God testified to something*. Once we have located the relevant sub-type of the latter, we then collect satisfactory evidence for its reliability. If Reason tells us that on that evidence the type is probably reliable, then Reason in turn tells us that it is probable, on that evidence, that the human testifier spoke truly in testifying that God testified to something. We are then ready to consider how reliable is the type, *God testifying to something*. Our Reason tells, without more ado, that this type is totally reliable; it is self-evidently so. And so, of course, this example of the type is true testimony. In short, though it is appropriate to speak of the light of revelation, and more broadly, of the light of testimony, Locke does not regard that light, at bottom, as different from the light of evidence.

History is filled with people thinking divine revelation had occurred when it had not. Anyone who is not willing to “give himself up to all the extravagancies of delusion and error” concerning the occurrence of revelation “must bring this guide of his light within to the trial”—that is, must allow Reason to render judgment as to whether some purported episode of revelation was really an episode. To act otherwise would be deeply irresponsible, a violation of the commands of God.

God when he makes the prophet does not unmake the man. He leaves all his faculties in their natural state, to enable him to judge of his inspirations, whether they be of divine original or no. When he illuminates the mind with supernatural light, he does not extinguish that which is natural. If he would have us assent to the truth of any proposition, he either evidences that truth by the usual methods of natural reason, or else makes it known to be a truth, which he would have us assent to, by his authority, and convinces us that it is from him, by some marks which Reason cannot be mistaken in. Reason must be our last judge and guide in every thing. I do not mean, that we must consult Reason, and examine whether a proposition revealed from God can be made out by natural principles, and if it cannot, that then we may reject it: But consult it we must, and by it examine, whether it be a revelation from God or no: And if Reason finds it to be revealed from God, Reason then declares for it, as much as for any other truth, and makes it one of her dictates (IV,xix,14).

Epistemological tyranny is one, though only one, of those various dynamics in human life and affairs which lead us to fail, and to cause others to fail, in carrying out our divinely-imposed cognitive and doxastic obligations. Locke's explicit view is that such failure is, at bottom, a failure of will rather than of Reason. Certainly it's true that the 'perceptive' powers of Reason come in varying degrees. “There are some men,” says Locke, “of one, some but of two syllogisms...” (IV,xx,5). Give them a syllogism in any form but **Barbara**, or maybe **Barbara** plus **Celarent**, and they are helpless. But if

Reason—the capacity to ‘perceive’ the logical force of arguments—is wholly absent in a creature of human form, then that creature is not yet truly human or no longer truly human. Either infant or mad. Thus our nature as human beings constitutes a fundamental limitation on the power of the epistemological tyrant: Try as he may, he cannot extinguish the light of Reason in his subjects, short of driving them into madness. Glory be to God for this inestimable gift of Reason!⁵

All well and good, we say, that all of us carry about within ourselves a candle of Reason which even the most subtle epistemological tyrant can extinguish only by plunging us into the darkness of madness. What good does that do us if we find ourselves in “almost Egyptian darkness,” wherein we neither desire nor dare to use our candles to illuminate anything except what the tyrant wishes or permits?

The answer is that, for it to do any good, epistemological tyranny must be overthrown and a new ‘liberal’ society created. It is then that we will have ground for celebrating, with thankful relief, the fact that the candle of the Lord had never been extinguished. It is then that its light can be put to use. Lockean epistemological piety requires as its counterpart the struggle for social reform. The confidence that the candle of Reason, no matter how subtle the devices of the epistemological tyrant, had not been extinguished in sane adults, is what gives us hope to initiate the struggle.

A new kind of education will have to be instituted, aimed at inducting citizens, from childhood up, into that practice which constitutes rightly conducting one’s understanding. The educational reforms Locke recommended, in the letters published as *Some Thoughts concerning Education*, were regarded by him as an indispensable part of his total vision; that becomes clear from his late small book, *The Conduct of the Understanding*. And a new kind of space for a new kind of public discourse will have to be created—a space of “peace, and the common offices of humanity, and friendship, in the diversity of opinions.” For

we cannot reasonably expect, that any one should readily and obsequiously quit his own opinion, and embrace ours with a blind resignation to an authority, which the understanding of man acknowledges not. For however it may often mistake, it can own no other guide but reason, nor blindly submit to the will and dictates of another. If he, you would bring over to your sentiments, be one that examines before he assents, you must give him leave, at his leisure, to go over the account again, and recalling what is out of his mind, examine all the particulars, to see on which side the advantage lies...(IV,xvi,4).

Pretty clearly Locke placed his own writing in the context of this struggle for a new kind of society. In the “Epistle to the Reader,” with which he prefaced the *Essay*, he first remarks (probably with false modesty) that he

had so little desire to appear in print that if he had not been flattered that his *Essay* "might be of some use to others," he would "have confined it to the view of some friends, who gave the first occasion for it." He then continues, "My appearing therefore in print, being on purpose to be as useful as I may, I think it necessary to make, what I have to say, as easy and intelligible to all sorts of readers as I can." Locke was not an academic writing for academics but an intellectual writing for the shapers of English society.

Gratitude for God's gifts of human nature and revelation, along with obedience to God's commands for the use of our cognitive and doxastic nature, the obedience shading into a struggle for social reform nourished by the hope-generating confidence that, no matter how deep the Egyptian darkness in which our sane comrades may find themselves, the candle of the Lord within them will not have been extinguished—those are the main contours of what I have called Locke's "epistemological piety."

One more point must be made. It's a point that casts a dark shadow over that bright hope—though I find no evidence that Locke himself acknowledged that. In the penultimate chapter of the *Essay*, titled "Of wrong Assent, or Error," Locke makes some general observations about the causes of falsehood in our beliefs. "Want of proofs," he says, is one such cause, along with "want of ability to use them" and "want of will to use them" (IV,xx,1). But far and away the most interesting and portentous cause is the fourth: "wrong measures of probability." People make mistakes in their appraisal of the logical force of arguments. On first hearing, this sounds like the manifestation of a defect in Reason: Reason too is fallen. But that can't be what Locke means. Reason is a mode of apprehension, of awareness, of 'perception'. And either one 'perceives' something or one doesn't; there's no such thing as erroneously 'perceiving' it. To be a man of but one syllogism is to be 'perceptive' of only one pattern of entailment, not to perceive entailments where there aren't any.

An obvious reply is that though, indeed, one can't 'perceive' an argument to be valid when it isn't, one might well have that peculiar 'I see it' experience, which typically comes with noting an entailment, in the face of an argument which happens not to be an entailment. One's subjective rational experience may get out of phase, in that way, with one's rational 'perception.'

But though this would have been an appropriate point to make, it's not the point Locke does in fact make, apart from just a hint or two. His point is more interesting—and with consequences which are, if anything, even more unsettling for his trust and hope in the inextinguishable powers of Reason. Locke locates the wrongness, of our wrong measures of probability, in our beliefs concerning probability; beliefs can be false as well as true. His question, then, is what causes mistakes in such beliefs? He cites four causes. One is "allegiance to authority." Though such allegiance occupies an extraordi-

narily prominent place in the totality of Locke's discussion, his citation of it here raises nothing new. Quite the opposite for the others, which he calls "inculcated principles," "received hypotheses," and "prevailing passions."

Here is Locke's thought: When some falsehood has been inculcated in one from childhood as a self-evidently true principle, then, when one later 'perceives' its contradictory, one may well emerge still believing that falsehood rather than now believing its contradictory. When one has staked one's academic reputation on the cogency of some argument, then, when one's students later point out some fallacy therein, one may well emerge still believing that the original argument is valid. And when some proposition that one believes to be false is also one that one *passionately wants to be* false, then, even though one discerns its high probability on satisfactory evidence, one may continue to believe it is false, telling oneself that one can't be at all sure about the strength of the argument nor whether the evidence is satisfactory.

It's true that we are not, in such cases, confronted with an error of Reason, as Locke understands Reason. But neither are we confronted with a fallen will. What we have instead is a "wound of the mind," of a most interesting sort. "Wound of the mind" is my phrase, not Locke's. But not only does it capture Locke's thought; Locke himself was fond of using medical metaphors. The fact that someone, who 'perceives' the proposition P on a certain occasion, does so as one who has long believed firmly that not-P is self-evidently true, inhibits that 'perception' from evoking in him, as it otherwise would, the belief that P. The fact that someone, who 'perceives' the non-cogency of argument A on a certain occasion, does so as one who has long believed firmly that A is cogent, inhibits that 'perception' from evoking in him, as it otherwise would, the belief that P. And so, similarly, for passion inhibiting the recognition that one's evidence is as good as it is likely ever to be and that one does 'perceive' its force. Our prior passions and our prior beliefs wound the mind in such a way that Reason's 'perceptions' fail to evoke the beliefs that they otherwise would evoke, if the mind were functioning properly.

"There is scarce anyone," says Locke, "so floating and superficial in his understanding, who hath not some revered propositions, which are to him the principles on which he bottoms his reasonings; and by which he judgeth of truth and falsehood, right and wrong..." (I,iii,24). But those may be false. The cure Locke recommends is examining carefully what one believes: using one's Reason. Some want "skill and leisure" for that, "others the inclination; and some have been "taught, that they ought not, to examine...(*ibid.*). So we, the reformers, have to try to evoke the desire for such examination in our fellows, and struggle to provide the opportunity. All this is standard Lockean fare—shortly to become standard 'liberal' fare. But what do we do if the mind that someone brings to the examination has been wounded by prior beliefs

and passions, so that, though Reason continues to do its work, the person doesn't *recognize* that it is doing it? The candles of humanity may be inextinguishable; but is that much ground for hope if, as we human beings try to find our way in this almost Egyptian darkness, we often don't recognize Reason's illumination when we see it and sometimes think we are recognizing it when we are not? And lastly: What about us, the liberal reformers: Have we managed to avoid the wounding of our own minds? Don't we also have "reverenced propositions"?

In the main, Locke's epistemological piety seems to me eminently appropriate for his epistemological convictions—eminently appropriate for one who is a Christian, that is. Not here. The hope goes well beyond what the convictions can sustain.

In its overall contours it was a version of *Protestant* piety that Locke delineated—not surprisingly, of course, giving his Puritan rearing. In Augustinian piety one turns inward, away from the world, and then upward, in the hope of a vision of God; the utility of the material world for our endurance is exhaustive of its significance for us. Not so, in Byzantine piety. The material world is not only useful for our endurance but mediates God to us; in the combination of those, but especially in the latter, lies its significance for us. Protestantism went beyond even this, to say that the bread and the wine of the Eucharist have a taste to be savored; the icons, color and design to be enjoyed. The worth of the world is not exhausted by its utility for our endurance nor even by its mediation of the divine; it is also for our flourishing. Lockean piety is an example of this 'turn toward the world' represented by Protestant piety. It has taken this 'turn' far beyond classical Protestantism, however. The longing for union with God which is so prominent in Calvin, for example, is almost totally absent from Locke. Lockean piety is a *truncated* version of Protestant piety.⁶

The converse of Locke's epistemological piety fitting his epistemology is that the piety is unfitting to other epistemologies. Reject the epistemology, and the piety is rendered irrelevant and inappropriate. The epistemology was already subjected to powerful attack by Hume—though few people at the time, apart from Reid and his followers, recognized or conceded that. The essence of Hume's attack, as I understand it, was his argument that there are vast ranges of fact to which Locke's method, rigorously followed, gives us no access at all, let alone, best access. Inductive inference, for example, gives us reliable access to a host of facts to which Locke's method, strictly followed, would give no access. Reid took the same line of thought much farther. Perception, memory, and testimony all give us reliable access to facts to which the rigorous use of Locke's method gives no access. For example, so argued Reid, the project of not accepting testimony until one has located some relevant type to which it belongs and then established, in Lockean fashion,

the overall reliability of that type, is hopeless. I find the Hume-Reid attack devastatingly compelling.

Which poses the ultimate possibility: May it also be the case that there are facts about *God* to which Locke's method does not give us best access? If perception, memory, and testimony are modes of belief-formation which give better access to various ranges of facts than what Locke sets forth as *doing one's best*, what reason is there for supposing that his method nonetheless provides best access to truths about God? No reason at all, so I and my fellow 'Reformed epistemologists' have argued. Which puts us in the position of also rejecting Lockean epistemological piety.

Yale University

NOTES

1. A recent book which argues this point for Locke's political thought is Joshua Mitchell's *Not by Reason Alone: Religion, History, and Identity in Early Modern Political Thought* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press; 1993).

2. The interpretation of Locke's epistemology which I will offer will have to be sketched in broad strokes here, and by and large unsubstantiated by textual references. For a full and substantiated treatment, see my *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief*, forthcoming.

3. Though I won't remark on it further, the eschatological note sounded in this passage is also a component in Locke's epistemological piety. The passage continues as follows: "...wherein to check our over-confidence and presumption, we might by every day's experience be made sensible of our short-sightedness and liableness to error; the sense whereof might be a constant admonition to us, to spend the days of this our pilgrimage with industry and care, in the search, and following of that way, which might lead us to a state of greater perfection."

4. Locke is explaining, in this passage, why it was that those aspects of God which *can be known* without any appeal to revelation were in fact *not discovered* by human beings using only their natural cognitive powers—or if discovered, not effectively publicized. In §241 ff. he addresses the counterpart question of why it was that those of our duties which *can be known* without any appeal to revelation—that is, 'natural law'—were in fact *not discovered* by human beings using only their natural cognitive powers. His answer to this question goes along essentially the same lines as his answer to the former.

5. Given the popularity of Locke and of Locke's perspective in early eighteenth century England, I would confidently guess that somewhere in the hymnody of the period is to be found praise to God for Reason; I happen not to know of any such hymn, however.

6. There's yet another way in which Lockean piety is an eccentric version of Protestant piety: In classic Protestantism, the governing metaphors are auditory: speaking and listening. Though Locke does, on a few occasions, speak about listening to the voice of Reason, his governing metaphors are overwhelmingly visual.